Did the *Anthropocene* even take place? A vertiginous reading of Spielberg's *A.I.*

> What that belt of swirling storms girdling the planet's midsection says is that the climate is not changing; it's that the climate has changed. None of the countries on the map are undiscovered. The storms show exactly where we're headed, and which parts of the world may not belong to humanity any longer. –Adam Rogers[i]
>
> The film is about the robotic post-human, and it uses a technique [CGI] that's occasionally described as "post-cinematic." Am I weeping for the death of David's mother, for the death of humans, or for the death of movies? –James Naremore[ii]

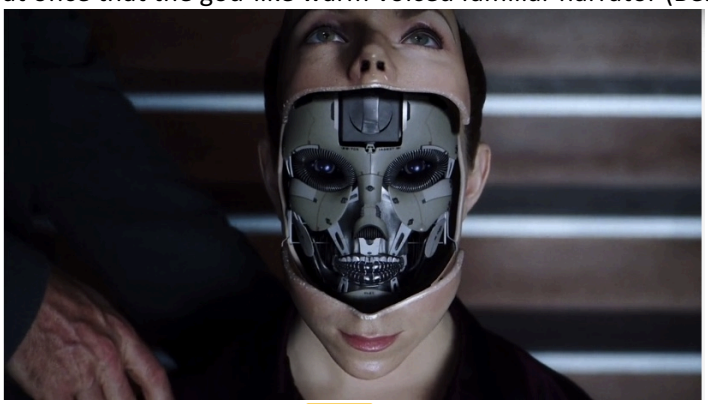
What a pleasure to be in Korea for the first time—having worked with a number of impressive, extremely impressive Korean students and scholars abroad, yet having managed in Asia primarily to do work in China. So, it is an honor to engage with you in, well, post-everything A.I. dialog, with all the head-spinning that Americans carry with them these days. I will try to keep what we mean by these days in mind, "2018," as I attempt a quick, rather traditional reading of a film. I say "post-everything" since I eschew the term and narrative myths of the present or coming "post-human," particularly but not only in its crypto-fascist fairy-tales for external consumption, since nothing has been more Anthropos-y that calling itself that since scripts and writing took shape—and the algorithm of "Socrates" is but one example of the monster who distracts from his own lack of definition entirely. It is not for nothing that when Plato found he had to define "man" at the Academy, he opted for a negative descriptor, "a featherless biped," to which Diogenes threw a plucked chicken down with the equivalent of "ecce homo." It is also no surprise that Diogenes did the same for Aristotle, whose more discrete artefaction of *the Anthropos*—by conjuring a *polis* as defining parameter, and excluding women, children and slaves—would be installed for millennia, echoing today in what might be called the de-extincted cartoon of a return of the White Privileged Anthropos in Trump, declaring by fiat the Anthropocene imaginary "fake news," climate chaos a "hoax," and pivoting into a spiral of extinction logics recently (if contradictorily) acknowledged simultaneously: the logic shifts in this movie from blanket denialism to, perhaps acknowledging the Cambrian explosion of climate chaos marking 2018, that it is too late anyway, catastrophic warming is now baked in, so there is no need to cripple ourselves with sustainability maneuvering, regulations and so on.[iii] So one should not be surprised that Diogenes seemed to see Aristotle's conjuring of the Anthropos as not even taking place—wandering about with his oil lamp in the mid-day sun searching, in vain, for some genuine or honest version of this fictional robot of sorts. This oil-lamp catches my attention, casting artificed light from an extractionist

source against the technics of sunlight, hinting at a cinematic machine without, in mid-daylight, shadows, without screen. The question for us is, if Anthropos never quite existed to begin with (imagining Diogenes' point), and our current evocation of him as a destroying monster of sorts, proud of his technological mastery and achievements, the "post-human" is even more presumptuous as an indicator not of evolutionary transcendence but of escape from its own trap, its clogged and captured digital memory banks and screens, and that in a way designed to entrance and mislead the *left behinds*. But that oil lamp remains a question, prototechnic of light, it winks at an oil era to ties cinema to Anthropos' accelerating consumption and extinction drive. It also hints at a cinema without a screen

I begin here with three premises, or hypotheses, which I'll loop back to engage. First, that cinema properly heard is itself the forerunner and genealogical way-station of A.I. today ("intelligence" having been always artefactual, that is techno-dependent, that is, for us, *arche*-cinematic—which today encircles us as a forest of small and large screens). Second, that the latter has always involved a practice of de-extinction. And third, that it is difficult to braid the twin narratives we tell ourselves: that A.I. will arrive and transfigure all, and that a mass extinction has now been materially triggered—as if there were a race between the two, which interface yet also separate and tend to eclipse one another is lethal (for us) ways. So, I will turn to the only work I know that engages all three directly and immediately, with the opening shot—in which a kindly voice overset on a raging sea narrates climate catastrophe and the rise of automous A.I. in its kindling phase, tells us a "fairy-tale," we think, of the "Anthropocene" (it's about us!), only to learn later the voice is put on for us by a hyper-evolved A.I. form, whose vaguely human outline seems gratuitous, that "we" have all been extinct for a while, that "we" are technically being de-extincted as audience much as the boybot David's long-dead "mother" is for a brief spell of staged cinematic bliss before—or as—the lights go out.

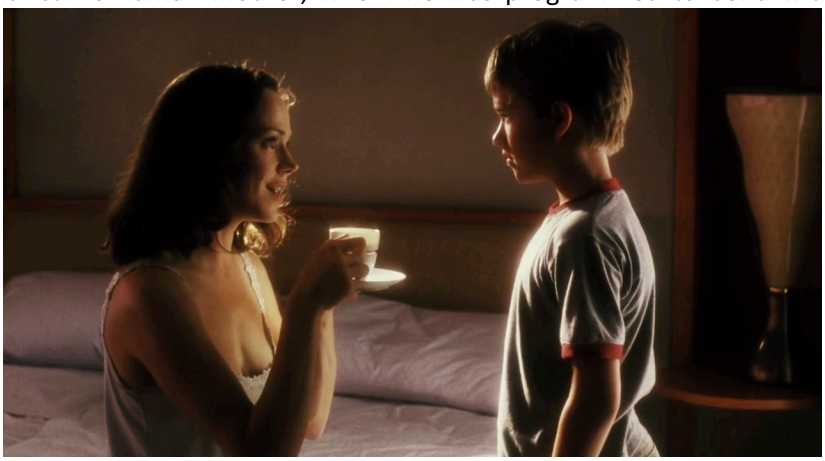
To think A.I. in the West, today, or to babble about "Anthropocene" this or that in the Asian fold feels peculiar always—as if you all are smiling, nodding perhaps, as the Western Anthropos talks about himself one last time, giving him the name of names and stamping it with extinction logics so no one can take it away perhaps. And the West creates a neo-inverse-Orientalism where Asia shifts from mysterious other, a history outside the curse or fold of monotheistic-alphabeticism, to appearing the hyper-technicists, embracing all matter of techno-gadgets and interface, from China's digital totalitarianism to phone-screens that have become, rightfully, appendages, to rumors (I haven't checked) that the Japanese cannot

be bothered with sex or reproduction anymore and have begun, at least gesturally, the slow-walk to prosthetic "love" entirely. It is weird, certainly, that A.I. too, like the now Saudi owned-Sophia, who clearly makes Saudi sheiks frisky, and we now are told by the handlers she is playing wants a baby. Girlbots are easier to sell, yet we recall Spielberg's oddly disruptive *A.I.—Artificial Intelligence*, which he sort of co-produced with the dead Kubrick (taking over the project), sending both into something of an auteurial death-spiral with the result. You recall this film, which tells the story from the point of view of the maturing A.I. robots assuming autonomy and, at the end yet from the beginning, having replaced we de-extincted humans. We don't get at once that the god-like warm voiced familiar narrator (Ben Kingsley, of *Ghandi*



fame and Shakespearean lilt) is from the first a super-Mecha—this world had been divided into Mecha (robot servants) and Orga (organic humans) when we are introduced to it—who is speaking from after human extinction has occurred: "he" will tell this story, this "fairy-tale" to us, in a fake warm human voice we would bond with, like a warm face, only it itself is generated just for us, like the last scenes of David with his de-extincted "mother" (Monica) are generated as a movie set for him. That is, the extra closing scenes that Spielberg added seem to contradict, muddy, and at first sentimentalize Kubrick's projected ending—the work ending with the boybot, wide-eyed, sunken beneath a submerged Manhattan or the aeons. The added ending changes everything, has future-gens A.I. showing up as archaeologists long after human's are gone, dredging up "David," downloading his memory as an archive of the human era (er, no one remembers the word "Anthropocene"), then allowing him to fulfill his obsessive compulsive "imprint," needing his human mother's love, as staged alone and the condition for a *Liebestod* closing them out. The ending was long deemed a fratricidal sabotage of Kubrick by Spielberg (in this broken narrative "Kubrick is therefore figured as the ghost in the machine and Spielberg as his eulogist")[iv], in which the boybot "David" who was abandoned, discovered he was merely one of an endless series of identical products, not "unique" (as he insists, as we watch the transition from merely programmed to autonomous bot-consciousness), came to rest frozen underwater in a submerged Coney Island for 2000 years, we are told by the voice, during which the humans finally extinct. It is a curious lacunae, this 2000 years, since in the usual genre of A.I. takeovers, feared in *Bladerunner's* more human than human replicants and engaged in sheer massacres on HBO's *Westworld*, humans tend to get bloodied and terminated by their rebellious slaves (classically) or made irrelevant. In those last scenes, which were greeted initially with rejection as Spielberg's going sentimental as so frequently and going soft-humanist on us (per usual, his adolescent settings winning out): the retrieved boybot

from an earlier era, for these Super-Mecha, who appear as *aliens* yet are remarkably empathic and just seeming, represents their forebear, a model who had actually lived with the humans, mythical Ur-Species to them, and is for them the walking archive of their entire passing: “"You are so important to us. . . you are unique. . . . You are the enduring memory of the human race, the most lasting proof of their genius." He, “David,” is the cinematic archive of the human episode for the Super-Mechas, who arrived after the extinction. He, “David,” can de-extinct his human mother, whom he was programmed to bond with unconditionally, taking over per program, despite neither sleeping nor able to eat to sexually differentiated, a transparently Oedipal narrative and mimic role that, if boringly human, is deconstructed and suspended in advance in its mimicry (like David eating imaginary spaghetti—in which he, nonetheless, is lost. “David” is allowed a day with his de-extincted mother (some hair was available), in a recreated mise en scene of the old home that the Super-Mecha watch over like movie technicians, crawling into the experience of unconditional love, of womb-like curling, of pre-uterine warmth, as staged, for one day before the de-*extincted* falters (like a robot of old), and death takes both. It is a weird *Liebstod* by way of intra-uterine regression, literalizing a borrowed and technically irrelevant Freudian script with an unintended Nero-effect of techno-matricide.



Now, before proceeding, I will explain why I puzzle over this work, though I have not liked Spielberg—despite recognizing his mastery, and prizing a post-modern reflexivity he has, which he always references to Hitchcock: and that is to mark or think cinema itself, usually as the weird unhuman threat (de-extincted dinosaurs, pulsing sharks, screwed up boys, diverse aliens). Something occurs in *A.I.*, however, a sublime meltdown, where, no doubt as with the evoked imaginary of Cain and Abel, Kubrick and Spielberg implode in faux Oedipal or fratricidal contest, like “David” smashing his duplicate version without ending his woes, which falls aware to produce a different auteur. In essence, the Cain and Abel citation is voided as a mechanically pretended fratricide—much as it is mocked in Hitchcock’s *Family Plot*, his last work and that to which John Williams would link up as mutual composer, where a mountain café is named *Abe and Mabel’*s. What we witness is deeply ranging despite all the showmanship that marks every new bot and *mise en scene* as what the critic cited above calls “allegories of cinema,” the genealogical fore-runner of A.I. where all “intelligence” is artificed by memory technologies. Such include Gigolo Joe and the *Flesh Fair* itself, where human spectators capture and essentially lynch or destroy runaway bots as in a Coliseum setting that mimes the relation of movie audiences to their destroying screens. Spielberg is careful to place one black woman among Dr. Hobby’s initial seminar who alone directly challenges the entire premise and experiment of producing a “loving” robot to fill the need of childless mothers—doubting the white Anthropoi represented across the work as the fairly messed up, cruel, and weak-minded humans, the ability to love it—tagging the semblance of capturing runaway slave bots, essentially, as a framed-out but marked *black* underbelly to the suburban white civilization broadly presented across the work.

Much as the opening voice is generated "for us," or the way David's mother is in the closed mise en scene staged for him, A.I. turns out not to be about the emotions of the boybot and his rejection by cold, self-centered, violent humans—turning us, in ways, against the extincted Ur-species the film references by downloading "David's" memories to reconstruct—what the entire film reconstructs, in the absence of people, including ourselves, who are being coddled like the perma-regressive "David," is the curiosity of the Super-Mechas about their own origins or past, to which David is the cipher, and link, to be relinquished.

The film-loop *A.I*. is, I would say, the only technically correct "Anthropocene" cinema we have—except perhaps for all other films, as I will remark—in so far as the term is itself an absurd trap: since it can only be (geologically) confirmed from a future epoch looking back, with entirely other eyes (or, say, just lenses, or lens as such), the speaker of the term can only inhabit a non-present that is post-extinction itself, bifurcated against the present it then pretends to speak from but is not in. This may illuminate why, today, when we all know the worst is coming and already here, we are content to spectate and speculate as tipping points pass that, we imagine, future generations will get mauled by (ah, the greatest generation: boomers, who took down a whole planet). It is the only "Anthropocene" cinema, the only cinema that speaks back on "the extinction" that is a given—referenced, in the opening frames with the first voice-over, to the oceans' wrath, origin of "life" and inundator of the hyper-industrial race passed tipping points. Climate chaos accounts for the economics of a Cambrian explosion of robot-servants, of

which Gigolo Joe (Jude Law), a made for order servicer of women, is a spritely type, purveying too the prostitution services that mimetic cinema serves up as identificatory trance. Moreover, as a pure cinematic artefact, the film's rhetorical manipulation of audience identification is vertiginously savaged by the unsettlingly manipulative face of the boy actor (Haley Joel Osment), takes on: one falls into it and is repulsed simultaneously, in what cannot be called an "uncanny" effect from the POV of A.I. itself. The Spielberg entertainment aesthetic operates like Gigolo Joe, servicing yet stripping our need for face, the actor's or the bots or the screen. When Dr. Hobby, the director's first stand in, presents the female model Sheila to his class, she is interrupted after being told to undress, dangling the female lure over the machine, then demonstrates how the face itself parts to disclose the grid beneath, like the mechanations of cinematic production of the screen or the spells experience: it plays with, and defaces, routine human identification and anthropo-narcissism with an always in advance machine which, if that has all along been cinema, and the latter were the forerunner of A.I. systems (developed in part from video-gamer world, Spielberg's dystopian AR update in *Ready Player One* (2018), in which the *total bifurcation* of a self-enclosed AR public space of fantasy wars and regurgitated cinema (and its monsters, ceaseless cited or revived as memory itself) has occurred over a ruined earth and cities made like favelas of stacked transport tins. Like the warring media-ecologies in America, fueled by Macedonian troll-factories, these digitally

powered enclaves are embubbled as to their "facts" and death-contests: that is, at least, in Trump's upside down U.S. today. One thing we don't tend to notice about Trump (and, no doubt, his corollaries) is that two things occur from the point of view of the so-called Anthropocene: first, he represents the retro-return of a sort of monstrous Western Anthropos, gold-painted hair, a mega-extractivist, accelerating the eco-catastrophic narrative beyond reversal with affirmative abandon; second, he does so while declaring by fiat the Anthropocene Imaginary over, non-existent, fake news (along with climate chaos). If this shift consolidates a hyper-elite (a global ".0001" percent) that has broken away from the rest and now controls resources and wealth, digitally transferred en masse, it should not be read from bland critiques of "inequality" but from the perspective of the extinction to come: these would be survivors, we understand, will retool with exponential A.I. technologies to be longer lived (hybrid organs), mnemonically enhanced, the fulfillment of that techno-eugenicism that has driven the West and, if delayed in World War II due to its tribal literalism, has simply transferred all that to the very top. I trope this odd if not artificed "present," which we are in but don't quite inhabit, the *Trumpocene*, what replaced the speculative phase of Anthropocene 1.0., when the tumult and violence of climate chaos, an abstraction for this discourse, arrived. In this view—I am trying to channel the hyper-Mecha now if not Ben Kingsley—this wresting of resources and A.I. for the few arrives with escapist imaginaries: said earth-life will not be preserved or sustained, but rather it all will be accelerated because it is now too late, and the race will produce the hybrid humans who will resist a trashed earth or have means to get out of Dodge when it goes (hence all the chatter about Mars—good luck getting a ticket). I will return to this curious present we now occupy, and its relation to the film outing I'd been drawn to take more seriously as an outing that I might most Spielberg works.

A.I. represents, in the work, the "fairy-tale" of its origin-myth as the progeny of pure cinema, as Hitchcock called it, or the arc of cinematic perceptual and mnemonic organization we trace, as Bernard Stiegler has re-narrated for us, the arche-cinematic precursors in the cave "paintings" (now understood as light shows, cin-animated), organized in Plato's allegory of the cave and fulfilled, mechanically, in the megaplexes with the digital transfer of screens (as "public space") to hand-sets, AR goggles, digital totalarianisms hard and soft. But if A.I. is, as here, an order of mnemonic production featuring talking faces that split to disclose the machinal or automated; if *A.I.* the film itself does so by a backloop that, not unaware, addresses us (patronizingly, as "fairy-tale") by a pseudo-familiar voice (Kingsley), *after* human organisms are gone; if cinema as A.I. itself had been, in this sense, always there, always non-human and generative of the latter's trust in face and its mimetic and referential regimes while marking extinction of the latter as give, marking the entire experience of cinematized cognition as a form of de-extinction in advance, then it had always practiced a sort of de-extinction to begin with, preceded as mnemo-technic imprint (as the boy's bonding, by chosen magic words, to his "mother"), always implied and assumed that extinction. This, much as the lens optic—the photo-cinemagraphic arc which partakes of that targeting and mummification (as it was called in the early days of machinal cinema)—cannot be dissociated from the entire arc of light production, the *jouissance* release of "stored sunlight" that defines carbon transfer to the atmosphere, that is, the oil era today (no oil, no photography and no cinema as we knew it, a separate discussion).

A.I. takes over the auteurship of *A.I.* the film machinally, as noted, deconstructing both Kubrick and Spielberg, caught in faux fratricidal contest. Like the boybot who merely mimics and literalizes the "Oedipal" family script (grotesquely realized in the de-extinction of "mom" for a day), all the received human décor of the human relationship to the screen—abject mimeticism and identificatory push-buttons foremost—are stripped, all along posed by "David's" impossible to (not) identify with face. And to Spielberg's credit, here, at least, he becomes the puppet himself for this execution: the entire ending of the work that he adds on, more than brilliant, does so by devastating "Spielberg's" signature ticks and, with it, the entire mimetic pretext or screen that keep any audience spellbound by identifying with what *Bladerunner* calls "skinjobs" appearing only on a screen, a screen now *CGI* generated, entirely by and of an A.I. evolution. "David" can appear not only as a simulant Anthropos, white, male, preppy enough, suburban, and so on, but a stand-in for the entire analog archive as transitional to the digital totalization of the hyper-Mechas. The only film of, about, and staged at all point after, human extinction, it presents a *mise en scene* that is already cinematized (like David's day with mom sans the viper brother Henry or father around, all to himself). It is one where mimetic cinema, ours, is defaced and turned against as the equivalent of the regressive day of de-extincted bliss with "mother" to ease the big sleep. It is also a *mise en scene* in which the audience itself is de-extincted, where only A.I. forms commune and stage cinema sets with and for one another, without us. The circle that haunts the visual props begins to spin off its axis, accelerating into a feedback loop and biomorphic ribbon, as the hyper-Mecha god-narrator tells the "fairy-tale" of the intermediary form, "David," or his tragedy in still mimicking and taking on or wanting love from the humans), to his own kind—since even "David" is gone then, the entire archive of the humans

preserved under the sea. A.I. is telling an origin myth or "fairy-tale" to itself of the mysterious gods that distantly crafted them—though no longer needing human body forms except in the most feint, alien-citing outlines. When David's outline first appears at the glass door where Monica sees him, the bent light replicates the hyper-mecha's alien form as shadow, before materializing as "David"—in which, Spielberg alludes to the hyper-mecha inhabiting the cinematic loop, now "playing" David within it in advance: from the humans manipulating and abandoning robots like David to the hyper Mecha de-extincting and managing a defunct human semblance, the circuit appears to fold into itself. But by the work's prepossession by and of A.I., which is to say sheerly cinematic machines within "animation," what appeared a circular logic has spilled out into an accelerating backloop, stripped of the memory of the human host—it was not humans who took up tools and contrived hyper-technological wonders and artefacts, it was a technicity that chose the hominem as Host to evolve itself and exceed that organic host, who had consumed and defecated on the planet to the point of irreversibility.

This returns us to 2018, in a fashion, if we can locate ourselves in the rising swirl: perhaps we can hail A.I. as empowering "us," or wresting control of the world (Putin), or sealing the next evolutionary split (er, against we left overs), or we can debate whether to treat coming robots "ethically" (presumably not at the newly arriving bot brothels)—mini fairy-tales abound? Perhaps you will have noticed that is difficult to track increasingly, prompting fetal positioning before our mobile screens. I return to my opening problem—how the narratives of A.I. and of climate chaos, the digitally encompassing and the bio-material real of the universe itself, collude, braid, are inseparable, yet also bifurcate and tend to eclipse or occlude one another when addressed. If my primary interest is tracking the two narratives we have imposed on us today which inter-braid yet often appear disconnected if not sealed from one another, so works like *Her* or *Ex Machina* or *Westworld* ignore climate chaos to pursue refined techno-narcissisms and artefacted memory-worlds, A.I. blithely opened with a focus entirely on that, as already a given, past tensed entirely, emphasized in the watery frozen world of the close. (Hint two: how does a global warming planet turn to a freezing one, icing over David, in a mere two millennia if not by a nuclear winter, or similar missing moment.)

A.I. makes a performative claim, in short, for the complicity between the arc of cinema and the extinction event (when "David" is called the archive of the human experience, what is meant is that all cinema would, technically, be that, much as Hitchcock speculated on his work being viewed in thousands of years to see how "we" lived (or not)). What one does not see or hear in A.I., where the POV of the A.I. has to baby-talk us with cartoon faces and sentimental yearning, with innocent boy faces and girl bodies, with Ben Kingsley's masterpiece theater voice, as one critic calls it, and that all this mimeticism is faux—a coddling and putting us to sleep, as is Hollywood's role socially, to our own fore-doomed imprinting or automatisms, now captured by digital totalitarianisms fiction of pre-empting chance, the to come, like, again, the law enforcing pre-Cogs of Spielberg's next outing, *Minority Report* (2002). *A.I.—Artificial Intelligence* implicitly accelerates away from the circular backloop in itself into the zones of sheerly non-organic cognition.

Cinema negates or overshoots itself as a vortex, in which the disparate feedback loops of extinction events run on their own. This appears to be what is becoming visible and remarkable today, as innumerable journalists, scientists, and philosophers note that, after moving the guideposts endlessly, we have in effect crossed said tipping points where the runaway has begun—evidenced already, shockingly for the unobservant, in the mega-droughts and superstorms and desertification and migrating species and de-extincted microbes and shrinking shores of 2018. Coastal mega-cities and island states taken down (Houston, Puerto Rico), brain-eating amoeba turning up in beaches, Trump policies premised on it being over and irreversible anyway, all gone by century's end, so triple down and accelerate the sucker. After

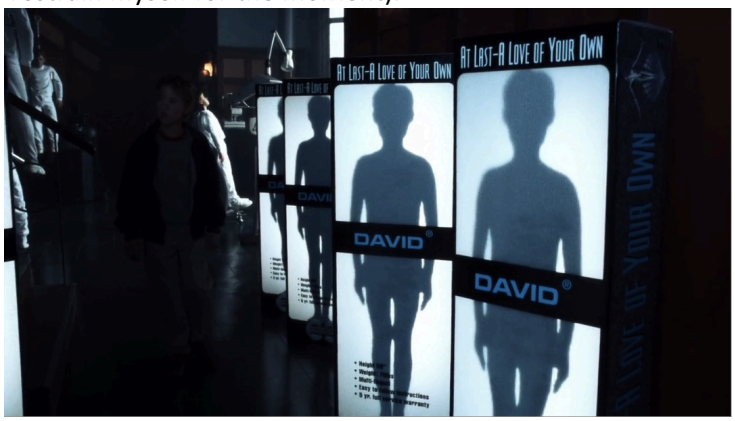
the epoch of circular dis-inhabitation by A.I. interfaces with that in which the bare "materiality" and bio-materiality of the planetary has shifted irreversibly. That is, there is a shift from a kind of circular entropy, if one likes, into a Maelstrom or vortex-system that proceed and accelerate as if on their own. Such as we have just entered in passing tipping points and entering an irreversible acceleration that can, at best, be delayed, for a time, for some: this is not a bug but a feature of the anomie of the "Trumpocene"—as has just been published, to multiple stunned head-scratching: Trump's trashing of the already fake Paris accords involved a total climate change denial, the revocation of the Anthropocene Imaginary by fiat, guaranteeing an acceleration of what Hawkings implied before his death (speaking of Trump) would turn Earth into a Venus hotplate, itself it turns out reckons that by end of the century (why do we use this absurd marker?), a catastrophic rise of 7 degrees fahrenheit is baked in now, so why fight it. We have entered a certain vertigo, even Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, in which the backloop of cinematic imprinting accelerates to both retrieve and destroy or lose everything, exitless? It is not accidental, today, that even Hollywood has caught up or run ahead, shifting from the clichés of post-apocalyptic fare, in which a few humans struggle to prevail and open a new future after the event (by the way, this is how the Silicon Valley bros and ".001 %" preppers today refer to it when eye-balling New Zealand real-estate or helipads). A recent critic marked this shift as identifying, finally, against ourselves, the human screw-up species, and with either the nextgens cyborg replacements (*Ex-Machina*, *Westworld*), or outright for extinction—and this in superhero flicks. There, in the Avengers—Infinity War, the poor super-villain Thanos, the most philosophical and

affective character, as all the superheroes make adolescent jokes and try out their new underwear suits, is only trying to save the universe from self-extinction by randomly, justly, without attention to class or wealth, vaporizes half of life with a finger snap (the end of that film)—earning him an internet following under the tag, *What did Thanos do wrong*?

Why would the *epoch of climate aporias and climate panic*, what Bernard Stiegler posits as an epoch without epochality, the post-Anthropocene about which "A.I." thinks itself, or for that matter a Trumpocene acceleration passed tipping points, when temporalities are radically altered—why would these reference *Vertigo's* mnemo-technic or biomorphic vortex, inhabiting a *woman's* eye, the paranoid "eye," or the visual caught in this graphic?

Here's where *A.I.* shows its madness—since the post-modern side of Spielberg puts on display that behind the side-show of faux fratricidal combat between Spielberg and the dead Kubrick, the real appeal by Spielberg is outside any Oedipal fictions, such as "David" is compelled to copy but make no sense for a de-sexed life form. The real mechanical grid behind the split apart face in cinema is Hitchcock—who is self-defeatingly cited three times (by my count in the work), one in which Spielberg pointedly hired the composer John Williams, who scored Hitchcock's last film *Family Plot* as a totemic channeling of sorts. If all intelligence is "artificial" for its derivation from evolving memory technologies and marking systems,

and the organization of imprints and projections was cinematic and became industrial cinema and detached screens, implants, and AR, and so on, today, then the hyper-Mechas looking back on "David" as a 20th and 21st century cinematic archive of the human event, Hitchcock appears already to have been there for Spielberg. But the citations are weird and over the top, and I do not have time to explore each fully at the moment (I restrain myself for the moment).



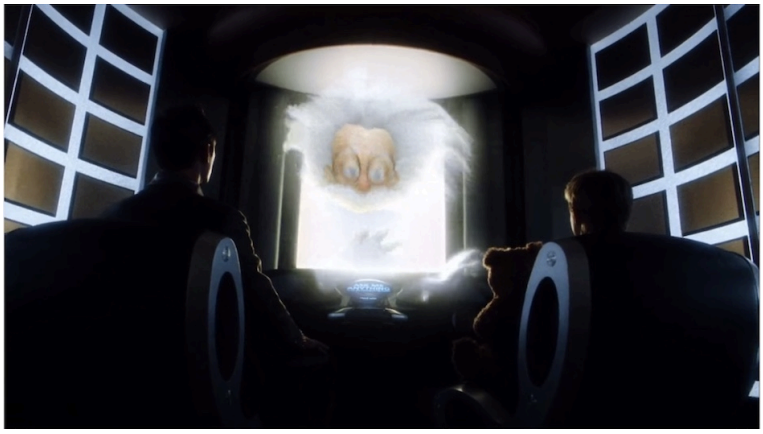
A.I. ups the stakes when Spielberg both marks and is absorbed by this encounter with Hitchcock—who may be regarded as the machine within the split-apart face that cinema, like Spielberg, takes measure from. Spielberg invokes Hitchcock (as more outrageously does Tarantino) as a certain thinking of cinema by itself. Three times the hyper-Mecha of cinematics, Hitchcock, is overtly cited and dialogued with by *A.I.*, each mad attempts at appropriation. Each splits apart the "face" of the screen's fiction or voice or "fairy-tale."

--A first invokes the psychotic-seeming total amnesiac in *Spellbound,* Gregory Peck, in a murderous-seeming cinematic trance, approaching the sleeping woman-mother with a razor cited weirdly when the boybot "David" hovers with scissors over the sleeping Monica, in order to take some hair--tricked

by Henry to magically earn her love (which strands of hair later provide DNA used to de-extinct her for a single day). The blank memory of Gregory Peck's zero-likened figure in the post-war moment is marked the void bearer of a missing "new head" (as the film refers to his rotating arrival at the sanitorium Green Manors): here, any personality or identity, like Peck's appearing as the murdered doctor, is artificed over the empty stare of the screen, and this is channeled to the bot-boy craving reciprocal love from the imprinted bonding on his non-organic "mother" figure.

--A second is even more vertiginous, which is a direct transformation of a core scene on cinema in *The 39 Steps*, the machinal character called Mr. Memory, bearer of a formula for mass destruction, a silent (cinematic) bomber turned against the homeland, presented as vaudeville in the opening scene: he

only records “facts,” things of the past, like the claim of still shots, entertaining a raucous lower-class variety show (a cinematic enclave for which Mr. Memory substitutes for the screen). Spielberg doesn’t expect anyone to recognize this, and it is a dialog within and between cinematic logics, but it is directly mimed by the visit to the



CGI hologram of “Dr. Know” in the raucous mecha-red light zone, traversed with catholic statues of the Virgin Mary, a “Dr. Know” crossed with Yosemite Sam’s cartoon moustache. The two mecha, Gigolo Joe and “David,” now question Dr. Know, who is paid like a dancing chicken generating fortune cookie sayings—but on algorithms—and he first dispenses with “flat facts,” then to yield to a hybrid with “fairy-tales” so “David” can allegorize the generated answers, setting him further on his regressive quest, as a bot, to experience womb-like encirclement or pre-uterine bliss. Mr. Memory for the CGI phase, when “flat facts” of analog media is pre-inhabited by a now shared, or totalized, A.I. artifice still, like the film, mockingly endowed with knowledge of the past (of the hyper mechas own genealogy), which the entirety is narrated from the perspective of to our de-extincted selves. But Spielberg cannot update or upgrade Mr. Memory to a CGI cartoon interrogated by two inquisitive bots without to “no” in the proper name of the doctor inserting itself, and the Yosemite Sam idiocy of an algo driven Wiki-lord missing any traction: there is no weapon of mass destruction at issue, as Mr. Memory himself becomes the carrier of (cinema itself); “Dr. Know” has become a narrative tool or toy; if Mr Memory dealt only in “facts,” Dr. Know’s “flat facts” are paired with “fairy-tales” in advance in the last paid for questioning (in *The 39 Steps*, the ticket paid for entry, by a hand, is that of entering the cinema itself, the transaction of the viewer who only gets to hear “facts” repeated, with certain no-go zones, like the future or Mae West’s age). This is a post-cinematic doctor.

--The third dialog or would be appropriation is, however, vertiginous, if you like, and transumes the first two, and it involves and invokes *Vertigo*. And it occurs early, before the mayhem of “David’s” dangerous quest begins, in the richly green forest scene in which he is abandoned and Monica tells him to run off, like a dog rejected by the family left by the road. He wails at his (non) mommy not to abandon him—and of all things, there are musical hints of the Vertigo score (again, by a bona fide **Hitchcock** collaborator), yet the scene itself

combines two: the scene among the giant Redwood, the oldest living things ("David" is not able to die, obversely, the newest evergreen/everliving thing), and the ending bell-tower scene of Scottie's total devastation as Judy/Madeleine goes over the edge for real, and the vertiginous backloop closes out an irreparably broken limbed Scottie, a shattered or voided puppet. Only this time the evergreens are rampant ferns, surrounding an obverse pair. What on Earth, so to speak, does A.I. have in mind—that is, the logic that puppets "Spielberg" into self-erasure, here, of his contest with Kubrick, of his sentimental signatures, of his recuperative post-modernism—putting the invocation of *Vertigo's* shattered closing of its circle with Madeleine's fall and the Redwood scene, jointly, with "David" being dragged through it all with a faux Orga "mom" abandoning him? "David," a non-sexed cyber-boy "imprinted" (words, reading, and texts dominate the film's underbelly) with his non-mom? Yikes—it is like "David's" face after eating green spinach, melting to the side! But Spielberg's attempt to perhaps supercede Hitchcock somehow backfires: it is, after all, not the circularity of the narrative, disclosing a patronizing "masterpiece theater" voice speaking after our own extinction and, in Monica, temporary de-extinction both, that stands out, but that such circularity or seeming entropy in advance, with cinema's advent, tips into a vertiginous fall, an accelerant feedback-loop which, however, is the formal condition of mnemotechnic humans or their programmed ticks (mimeticism, identification, face). One might wonder if Spielberg, by having bot David absorb three iconic moments in Hitchcock indexing the mechanics of cinematic memoration, he perhaps tries to turn from the faux fratricidal contest with Kubrick to the more daringly mock-Oedipal one of asserting that David's trajectory continues beyond Hitchcock, beyond the "ending" of Vertigo, say, something else occurs.

The famous *vertigo-swirl* in the blond woman's eye opening the credit sequence of *Vertigo* turns into a biomorphic graphic coil in and preceding the paranoid eye itself, Judy's or Madeleine's or another's (we are too close to identify a face). It is inescapable, irreversible—as well as a text and

JAMES STEWART
KIM NOVAK
IN ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
VERTIGO
SCREENPLAY BY ALEC COPPEL & SAMUEL TAYLOR
ART DIRECTION HAL PEREIRA & HENRY BUMSTEAD
SPECIAL PHOTOGRAPHIC EFFECTS JOHN P. FULTON, A.S.C.
PROCESS PHOTOGRAPHY FARCIOT EDOUART, A.S.C. & WALLACE KELLEY, A.S.C.
SET DECORATION SAM COMER & FRANK McKELVY
TITLES DESIGNED BY SAUL BASS
MUSIC BY BERNARD HERRMANN
DIRECTED BY ALFRED HITCHCOCK

problem my host, Mejeong Kim, has written well on. Perhaps that's why I'm drawn back to it—or perhaps, it is because of what has emerged to view in "2018" as we observe the logics, on Earth, in its accelerations, that have spawned not only massive climate disruptions, not only a weird identification in cinema with the justness of extinction agents and replacements; and not only because the natural logics of passing tipping points, which according to *A.I.* its precursor cinema knew all along and accelerated in every way, are those of endless new disruptions and re-actions, a sink of re-actions unable to keep up with the tectonic shifts themselves. When a vast entropic order tips into backlooping acceleration it is, resembles, and spawns vortexes—like that in what Hitchcock terms "vertigo" but what, today, have been described in multiple disciplines as a vortex today, when, according to the latest "Trump" aporia issued, it is not just that the Trumpocene denies and edits out "climate change," declares it fake news by fiat and so on, but that this is also inverted, paired with the new Federal declaration that since the very worst is locked in anyway by end of the century (a catastrophic 7 degree (F) rise), all the more reason to shred any pretense of sustainability and become hyper-extractive (to further separate out the billionaire elite). You might find this logic vertiginous, but A.I. seems to agree, that it was all locked in, that the speaking screen that is the hyper-Mecha called *the Specialist* (Ben Kingsley) knows this—Hitchcock called it "knowing *too much*," which he attributes to the media-machine-text. Thus, when Monica first first meets David his shadow is projected against the glass door already, as noted, outlining the hyper-Mechas form: he is either inhabited by one, already, who then "plays" David for the screen, or he is the ghost of cinematic projection all along, as the myriad stage pieces and bot-types and venues like Rouge City iterate in the "fairy-tale."

Hurricane Florence near peak intensity southeast of Bermuda on September 10

A.I. arrives, uniquely and despite or through the virtual boybot "Spielberg," scanning its genealogy in the arche-cinematic without "us." It wants to posit a beyond of its isolation and Scottie's absolute loss and absolute exteriority, in effect. It projects a quietude in this cyborg civilization where there is only cinema and no organic life to consume it as if from without. It is not accidental that the ocean and its inundations in the voiced-over opening converge here with the robot overlord successors, without "ourselves." If we have entered a phase of vertigo in "2018," of short-circuiting "post-truth" entrapments, memes without subjectivities, the vortex or Maelstrom of a no doubt elongated, but irreversible, panbiotic take-down against which we tell ourselves "fairy-tales," it is no wonder that, back to the order of social mutations we are familiar with, this image of storm and vortex seems to crop up everywhere, in localities, as in this description of the Western or American disorientation:

> As public fury in the U.S. has peaked again and again in recent months, it's become clear that the nation is not experiencing a single crisis. Instead, an angry trio of storms — revolts against immigrants, globalization, and establishment leaders and institutions — are churning independently and of their own logic. . . . the developed world appears to be turning back to the more Darwinian rules that prevailed prior to World War II. "It picks up where it left off"[v]

Missing of course is "climate panic" or whatever you want to call this trap and aporia, occluded from the frame (yet precisely the first personae of A.I.'s opening), one which only a robot could love, and only a stupid hyper-Mecha aping Ben Kingsley in order to win us over, we de-extincted and pre-extincted, would

appear to mourn. Some cinematic habits die hard. Because this vortex for us, we remaining old model anthropoid, is that captured by digital troll farms and shaped as perpetual *reactivism*, too late; and since it exploits resentment as a structure of "consciousness" after mnemonics has been turned into tele-advertizing and populist memes, one can see why the gentle "human" voice borrowed by the A.I.'s Mecha-narrator—we see them communicate wordlessly and instantaneously by downloading data. "We"—the de-extincted, like those faces on screen—are being patronized, to say the least, fed the sickening wallop of intra-uterine bliss staged for David in Spielberg's acidic add-on and end, coddled and put to sleep by the digital loops that insulate us and by which Hollywood preps we early Anthropoi to embrace retirement if only out of cognitive exhaustion. It is not accidental this conclusion appears to stage an analogic form or *mise en scene*, contrived by the hyper-Mecha, as if all along our mimetic cravings and identifications, such as cinema contrived and withheld at once, may as well be completely indulged now, much as Trump says of methane release or accelerating the already backed in "worst" warming outcome. As Matt Taibbi writes of the astonishing nihilism of Trump's death-drive:

> A policy that not only recognizes but embraces inevitable global catastrophe is the ultimate expression of Trump's somehow under-reported nihilism. . . . **Obese and rotting, close enough to the physical end himself (and long ago spiritually dead), Trump essentially told his frustrated, pessimistic crowds that America was doomed anyway, so we might as well stop worrying and floor it to the end**[vi]

But there is another consequence of Spielberg's reverse *arche*-cinematic meltdown (or up), and that lies behind the splitting away of face and the poisoning of identification and mimeticism as hyper-Mecha mind tricks such as any screen performs. It is routinely remarked how "uncanny" the effect Haley Joel Osment ("David's") *face* has, particularly when mimicking his adoptive Orga parents' ways—neither human nor not, too innocent and too alien packaged in the most tender, little boy pain for us to disown. But the work accomplishes what might be called the invacuation of the "uncanny" as a trope at all, since the POV is that of A.I., hyper-conscious machines after the human extinction is long over: there never was an "uncanny" since it is *we* who played *fort/da* rituals, who pretended the *Oikos* or home was a given or interior rather than an artifice. It is, has always been sheer exteriority such as the Mecha assume, having become a regime of "life." Spielberg's counter-Spielbergian ending is derangedly harsh—showing too the "tragedy" of imprinting a boybot soul with a perma-regressive setting, allowing it to achieve a sort of fetal position in the day with de-extincted "Monica," having cinema itself presented as such an anaestheticing pharmaceutical pleasure, oblivious to being, in essence, put to sleep. The same claim is made for our addictive relation to cinematic commodities and screens. For all we know, the hyper-Mecha may have been glad to let "David" auto-terminate in artificial memory bliss since he'd been clearly ruined, from the start, in having to "imprint" and mimic the vast sicknesses which prepped the latter for a starring role in what is essentially a civilization-long snuff film.

One might say from a hyper-Mega's perspective—the POV of the entire loop, the cognitive machine behind the human face—what is both solicited and shunned or cut-off is what "we" identify as our most "human" traits: empathy and identification, mimetic dependency and a sacred interiority (*psyche* or soul). These rest over an injunction to forget that mimeticism and empathy both may be seen to arise not as origiinary anchors of subjecthood but strategems of *deception*, as originary fabrications or covers.[vii] What is perhaps most striking about the bots of David's contaminated generation (aside from ever blinking), as well as the hyper-Mecha, is their lack of any sort of *resentment*—even when being blown apart for fun, even when David is betrayed to find himself a mass produced commodity, which causes him to erupt with rage, beheading his perfect semblance (not "brother") when *reading*. The barely embodies hyper-Mecha seem amazingly just and non-proprietary, non-consumptive of course (not organic), a "consciousness" not

premised on, or structurally fashioned by, the inscribed repetitions coalesced as or by resentment, mimetic fictions, selective empathy, pushbutton tribalisms. Which brings me to what I see as the hopeful utopianism of *A.I.*, which we are now trained to co-think as an "existential threat" (Gates, Musk), a lever of political control, a replacement of populations or jobs, or the avenging killer in some just uprising of de trop, unjust, proprietary and corrupt humans. I tend to anticipate the coming A.I. overlord as a sort of hyper-reader undeterred by occlusion, resentment, personal investment, face, robo-mimeticism, and so on

---

[i] https://www.motherjones.com/environment/2018/09/the-world-has-never-seen-anything-like-whats-happening-at-the-equator-right-now/

[ii] James Naremore, "Love and Death in A.I. Artificial Intelligence," *Michigan Quarerly Review*, Volume XLIV, Issue 2, Spring 2005.

[iii] http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2018/09/trump-administration-expects-catastrophic-warming-by-2100.html

[iv] Naremore

[v] https://www.axios.com/global-politics-immigrants-europe-nationalism-a4722c30-757d-4b8c-9a0d-e232d1be6db1.html

[vi] https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/trump-white-house-climate-change-731440/

[vii] Nils Bubandt and Rane Wilerslev, "The Dark Side of Empathy: Mimesis, Deception, and the Magic of Alterity," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (2015: 57 (1)), 5–34.